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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews literature on teachers' roles in children's play, discusses implications for teacher education, and proposes ways to help teachers better understand and perform their roles. Discussion focuses on research identifying four teacher roles: observer, organizer, participant/leader, and trainer. Research also shows that large numbers of teachers seem ill-prepared or unwilling to assume some or any of these roles, perhaps due to inadequate training. Discussion concludes with six suggestions for teacher programs working to incorporate the teacher role in children's play as a basic program component. (RH)

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The Role of the Teacher in Children's Play

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Abstract

While teacher education programs emphasize play theory, research suggests that teachers are often uncomfortable with their roles in children's play. Clearer focus during training is indicated. This paper reviews literature on teacher roles, discusses implications for teacher education, and proposes ways to help teachers better understand and perform their roles.

The Role of the Teacher in Children's Play

"In this century," declares Bruno Bettelheim (1972), "the importance of play in educating and socializing children has been recognized in theory, while greatly neglected in practice." Actually, play has always concerned educators, who ponder its relevance to the child's learning and development and hence to curriculum. Educators must constantly justify play as a valuable curricular constituent, and a vast body of literature based on both theory and research exists on such justification. Yet play's importance in any curriculum ultimately depends on social, political, and cultural currents, some deeply embedded in a nation's psyche, others transitory but attention-catching. Today, with emphasis on "back to basics," academic excellence, and accountability, many early childhood professionals find that they must begin justifying play's importance to the early childhood experience all over again.

Whether play exists as central to the early childhood curriculum, or as a separate entity de-emphasized for "academic" purposes, it needs careful consideration by the individual teacher. The teacher's role in children's play depends, of course, on the philosophical orientation of the school or center, and of the teacher concerned. The extent to which the teacher recognizes play's impact on cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development influence his or her acceptance of roles which enhance and expand play in the learning environment. Research has identified several such roles. These include the teacher as (a) observer; (b) organizer of the environment; (c) participant and leader; and (d) trainer. Research also shows that large numbers of teachers seem ill-prepared or unwilling to assume some or any of these roles (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). This may be because of inadequate training or emphasis on other aspects of teaching.

In this paper, we attempt to establish the importance of the teacher's role in children's play chiefly by reviewing existing literature which, when

looked at carefully, presents a powerful case for adequate teacher preparation in this area. Implications for teacher education programs are also discussed.

The Teacher as Observer

According to Cliatt (1980), play is "the window into a child's life." Observation of his children playing helped Piaget (1962) formulate many of his theories of children's learning. Observation illuminates emotional and social development, helps the teacher evaluate the developmental level, skills and interests of individual children, and determines what kinds of play environments and experiences need to be planned and implemented (Eheart & Leavitt, 1985). Furthermore, observation helps teachers verify research (Pulaski, 1981), and adapt it to particular settings. Finally, through observation the teacher identifies ways to extend play, and provide subtle or direct reinforcement. Thus, observation becomes a valuable tool in the skilled teacher's hands.

A variety of observation scales and checklists exist to assist the teacher. Cliatt (1980) provides a simple but useful checklist based on developmental theory for observing language, social, and emotional growth. Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987) describe various scales, each of which has value depending on context and the group or individual being observed. Fenson and Ramsay (1980), and Rosenblatt (1977) designed scales to use with very young children, while Sylva, Roy, and Painter (1980) developed one to use with preschoolers. Rubin, Maioni, and Hornung (1976) adapted scales by Parten (1932) and Piaget (1962), to deal with both social and cognitive aspects of play. The Howes Peer Play Scale (1980) looks at social play, while Smilansky's Sociodramatic Play Inventory (1968) scrutinizes children's group dramatic play skills. The teacher needs to be familiar with several of these scales, since the focus and target group of each is different. The teacher may also need to adapt some items to specific conditions and situations.

Modern technology has made observation more precise and reliable. A study of preschoolers by Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun (1980) found that audiotaped play events provided feedback for teachers to improve and sharpen their observational skills and procedures, and even to change their participation strategies. Videotaping is similarly effective.

The Teacher as Organizer

One of the teacher's tasks is to organize the environment not only for academic proposes but for better play as well. Careful consideration and re-creation of the environment ensures quality play. According to Griffing (1983), the teacher as play organizer concentrates on (a) time; (b) space; (c) materials; and, (d) preparatory experiences. Access and opportunity are also important.

Time. We may be approaching a period when time for play becomes increasingly difficult to find due to the growing emphasis on academics for even very young children. Yet it is imperative to set aside adequate time specifically for "rich, elaborated, and prolonged" play activities (Bruner, 1983). Even the most attractive, well-planned environment is only partially fulfilling without time allotted for play.

Time utilization depends largely on the child's age and play choice. For sociodramatic play, Griffing (1983) proposes periods of 30-50 minutes for preschoolers and kindergarten children. This ensures recruitment, role selection, prop and storyline choice, and actual play with extension. It is not easy to fit this kind of time into an academically structured curriculum. Johnson and associates (1987) suggest scheduling longer play periods a few times each week instead of shorter periods every day.

Space. Effective space utilization encourages challenging activities (Cataldo, 1978). Creative, unusual arrangements of traditional play zones

such as block and housekeeping areas, and of permanent and changing "theme" areas stimulate quality play (Kinsman & Berk, 1979; Woodard, 1984). Such arrangements can transform children's play patterns and enhance sociodramatic play.

The social quality of play may be affected by spatial arrangement. Conflicting findings exist. While Hutt and Vaizey (1966) reported that lack of space encourages aggressive play in preschoolers, Loo (1972) found less aggression, but also poorer quality of social interaction during play. On the other hand, a Dutch preschool study found crowded settings actually stimulate positive social interchange (Fagot, 1977).

Space arrangements can also influence types of play. Smith and Connolly (1980) found that less space discourages gross-motor activity. However, only when space is reduced to about 15 square feet per child does it cause aggression and inhibit group interaction. Furthermore, large areas divided into smaller sections limit rough play, generate interaction, and stimulate creativity (Sheehan & Day, 1975; Walling, 1977; Field, 1980).

The teacher as organizer must consider outdoor play when arranging space. Creatively arranged playgrounds enhance adventurous play (Frost & Henniger, 1979). Traditional playgrounds with large open spaces and less equipment encourage functional play, while creative modern playgrounds stimulate dramatic group play (Campbell & Frost, 1985). Playground type also affects social interaction. Bruya's (1985) research on playground linkages showed increased interaction, while Boyatzis (1985) found traditional playgrounds promoted solitary or nonsocial play.

Materials. Research indicates a strong link between children's play and the kind of materials provided (Rubin, Fein, & Vandeberg, 1983). Sociodramatic play is encouraged by costumes and props, while constructive play is increased

by puzzles, blocks, and art supplies. Hollow blocks and building boards stimulate problem-solving skills and imagination (Bender, 1978). Manipulative play materials such as clay offer creative experiences, and help children feel in control of their environment (Langstaff & Sproul, 1979). Skillful juxtaposition of materials enriches play, giving it depth and variety.

Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987) emphasize the teacher's responsibility in making available suitable toys and equipment. By manipulating toy access and changing props when needed, the teacher highlights various facets of play such as "free discovery," "prompted discovery," or teacher "directed discovery" (Peters, Neisworth, & Yawkey, 1985).

The amount and type of equipment affects social levels of play. Too much equipment restricts social interaction, while less equipment encourages social interchange but also aggression (Johnson, 1935; Smith & Connolly, 1980). Toys with interchangeable parts instigate more antisocial play behavior than those with non-interchangeable parts (Doyle, 1978). This implies that teachers should not only be aware of how much equipment to provide, but of what kind.

Preparatory experiences. These will be discussed in the section on play training.

Concerns of the teacher organizer. When arranging time, space, materials, and experiences, the teacher should be aware of each child as an individual (Greenman, 1985). Individual children mature at different rates and have differing play needs and interests (Marzolla & Lloyd, 1972). Moreover, it is well to remember that children are challenged differently by different things (Gulley, Eddleman, & Bedient, 1987).

Cowe (1982) warns that teacher "organizing" and "managing" can limit free play. Child-directed play is essential to dynamic programs, and play is its own reward. Greene and Lepper (1974) found that when children are rewarded

for freely chosen play activities, their interest in those activities dies quickly. Their enthusiasm is also curtailed by obvious surveillance. Gotz (1977) fees that when play becomes work, it loses spontaneity, whereas it should be "non serious, self-contained, worthwhile in itself." Play should be "self-initiated: One is free to start, join in it, stop and leave." Bruner (1980), too, warns against unnecessary intervention. Teachers must guard against destroying play through excessive zeal.

The Teacher as Participant/Leader

A common European teacher role is that of "playleader." Blalock and Hrncir (1980) stress sub-roles within this major role: (a) observer; (b) participator; (c) facilitator; and, (d) provider of materials. Within each role, the teacher is aware of pre-planned goals, and of adverse or beneficial effects of teacher behavior during play.

The playleader role is basically supportive. Children take the lead, while the participating adult expresses approval, observes and expands play, encourages exploration and independence, shows interest in children's ideas and experiences, and assists when necessary. However, interrupting or disrupting when all is going well, is a strong barrier to valuable play experiences. Conversely, the skilled teacher supports, facilitates, plans for, and models (Segal & Adcock, 1981), forging relationships with children that can seldom be achieved in other ways (Sutton-Smith & Sutton-Smith, 1974).

The length of play episodes is extended when adults participate. Dunn and Wooding (1977) found that two-year-olds played longer when their mothers joined in. Sylva, Roy, and Painter (1980) reported extended play when teachers participated. Richness, as well as length, results when teachers are involved nondisruptively (Bruner, 1980).

Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun (1980) studied play interaction of teachers and children in British preschools. They found four types of adult participation: (a) parallel play; that is, playing with the same materials without direct interaction with the child. This lends support, while demonstrating various ways to play with materials; (b) co-play, in which teachers participate, but children lead; (c) play-tutoring, in which the adult may initiate play episodes, have some control over them, and teach new ways to play; and, (d) speaking for reality, in which the teacher stays outside the actual episode, but helps children connect their play with the "real" world. This works especially well with older preschoolers.

Although a strong case for teacher participation in play exists, it is disturbing to note that in actuality the incidence of such participation is not outstanding (Tizard, Philps, & Plewis, 1976; Singer, 1977; Sylva, Roy, & Painter, 1980; Wood, McMahon, & Cranstoun, 1980). Teachers need to be alerted to the value of participation, especially in pretend and dramatic play, which often require teacher modeling and encouragement to grow and develop.

Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987) assert that the teacher is a "key element in the effects of curriculum on play." They suggest that teachers participate by (a) working "besides" play; that is, by observing and assisting; (b) working "within" play; and, (c) working "away from" play; that is, by planning activities around play events, and discussing them before and after play.

The Teacher as Trainer

The concept that children can be trained to play in a richer, more meaningful way still surprises some teachers, and is rejected by those who favor a hands-off attitude. However, studies show that such training is, possible, and can heighten the quality of play and learning.

Play training became a serious topic of study when Smilansky (1968) found that Israeli children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to utilize make-believe and sociodramatic play than those from higher income groups. With play training, or preparation for play experiences, the quality of such children's sociodramatic play improved. Studies in different countries by Feitelson and Ross (1973), Rubin, Maioni, and Hornung (1976), Garvey (1977), Smith and Dodsworth (1978), Smith and Sydall (1978), and Dansky (1980) support Smilansky's findings.

The studies mentioned above also found that playtraining strengthens verbal skills, mathematical ability, and creativity. Maxwell (1983) reported on research in Fiji where play tutoring with educational games helped raise the IQ scores of five- and six-year olds. Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987) point out that it is not certain whether the gains in these studies occurred because of increased adult-child interaction. They state, nonetheless, that whatever the cause, active training does stimulate cognitive and social skills. Moreover, gains achieved are lasting, as follow-up research by Smith, Dalgleish, and Herzmark (1981) and Christie (1983), has shown.

Play training involves internal and external adult intervention (Smilansky, 1968; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). Both types are rewarding. Inside intervention allows the teacher to participate directly when modeling play behaviors, while outside intervention involves teacher comments and suggestions as children play, but in a non-obtrusive manner.

Tutoring children for dramatic play through fantasy training (Marshall & Hahn, 1967) and thematic fantasy (Saltz & Johnson, 1974) is another enriching concept. These methods involve literature (Greenlaw, 1984), and are more structured than other strategies. However, structure and control could become a disadvantage, unless the teacher withdraws the directive role once

appropriate play behaviors are learned (Singer, 1977; Kleiber & Barnett, 1980).

Familiarizing children with materials, toys, and equipment commonly found in the "middle class" classroom is a key preparatory element in play training (Curry, 1971). Furthermore, organization of equipment, and subtle preparation and tutoring effect positive changes in stereotypical play patterns with familiar objects (Kinsman & Berk, 1979).

Implications for Teacher Education Programs

The impact of adult roles on children's play implies that serious attention should be given to preparing teachers for their part in their student's play. Unfortunately, while teachers often recognize play's importance in children's lives, they do not always understand how to make it meaningful (Martin, 1978). They need training in integrating play into the curriculum. One such program was designed by Manning and Sharp (1977). Singer and Singer (1977) also developed exercises to make adults better players. However, more programs are needed, and research on their effectiveness should be carried out.

As previously stated, teachers are often hesitant to participate wholeheartedly in children's play. To be as natural and as involved as the children concerned does not happen automatically when one becomes a teacher. Participation in children's play is, for most adults, a skill and art to be re-learned and refined. The teacher as participant may not feel as comfortable in this role as in that of observer or organizer-director. The participant role, moreover, is manifold, and runs simultaneously with other established teacher roles. It may thus prove quite stressful. Preparation for and modeling of this role should be an essential component of teacher education programs.

It may be easier for training programs to give greater attention to the teacher as organizer and observer than as play participant and trainer.

"Teacherhood," however should be considered as a whole. Thus, not only should teachers be trained to regard play as significant in the curriculum, but also to fulfill the various roles within roles which constitute one's totality as a teacher. How to draw back successfully from one role when the end has been attained, how to sustain several roles simultaneously or in close succession, are skills which should become part of every teacher's repertoire.

Teachers also need preparation in play training procedures and techniques. Clumsy attempts do more harm than good, and inappropriate disruptions detract from sustained quality play (Blalock & Hrncir, 1980; Bruner, 1980). Yet imaginative and sociodramatic play can, be skillfully extended and enhanced if teachers know how to tutor students to play well.

The following suggestions might be appropriate for teacher programs working to incorporate the teacher role in children's play as a basic program componant.

1. Develop and implement substantial and dynamic units on play extension and enrichment, giving special attention to play participation and tutoring.
2. Familiarize students with relevant literature on teacher roles and children's play.
3. Provide opportunities to observe successful teachers during play sessions.
4. Expose students to modeling which takes into account various types of play and play environments.
5. Encourage simulation and role-playing practice, and require supervised practice in authentic settings of the four major teacher roles related to play.
6. Provide sufficient and meaningful feedback through whatever means available.

In conclusion, more research seems called for on effective programs which stress different aspects of teacher involvement in an utilization of play. Meanwhile, enough is known to make such emphasis essential in teacher education programs.

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